

The advent of Islam in Arakan and the Rohingyas

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The advent of Islam in Arakan and the Rohingyas presented at the Seminar organised by Arakan Historical Society at Chittagong Zila Parishad Hall, Chittagong, on December 31, 1995, with Co-operation Chittagong University.

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Arakan is one of the states of the union of Burma adjoining Bangladesh. It comprises of a strip of land along the eastern coast of the Bay of Bengal from the Naf river on the border of Chittagong to the cape Negarise. It lies between the Arakan Yuma range and the Bay of Bengal. As a natural Physiographic unit-the whole region of Arakan is separated from the rest of Burma by this Yuma range running north to south. The total area of Arakan is over 13,540 square miles and its population almost 20, 00,000.¹

The Arakanese chronicles claim that the Kingdom was founded in the year 2666 B.C,² For many centuries Arakan had been an independent kingdom due to its geographical location with occasional short breaks. It was ruled by various legendary Indian dynasties and they made their capital at Dinnawadi (Dhanyavati), Wesali, Pinsa, Parin, Hkril, Launggyet and Mrohaung along the river Lemro.³ in the 8th century A. D. we come across a ruling family with the surname 'Chandra'. The rule of the kings is believed to have often extended as far as Chittagong - Wesali infact has been described as an "Easternly Hindu Kingdom of Bengal" from a study of the coins and foreign relations, M.S.Collis came to conclusion that,

“The area known as North Arakan had been for many years before the 8th century the seat of Hindu dynasties; in 788 A.D. a new dynasty, known as the Chandras, founded the city of Wesali; this city became a noted trade port to which as many as a thousand ships came annually; the Chandra kings were upholders of Buddhism,...their territory extended as far north as Chittagong; — -Wesali was an easterly Hindu kingdom of Bengal -"Both government and people were Indian.”⁴

In support of the above fact D.G.E. Hall also mentions, “The Burmese do not seem to have settled in Arakan until possibly as late as the tenth century A.D. Hence earlier dynesties are thought to have been Indian, ruling over a population similar to that of Bengal. All the capitals known to history have been in the north near modern Akyab.”⁵

The ruins of old capital of Arakan – Wesali show Hindu statues and inscriptions of the 8th century A.D. Although the Chandras usually held Buddhistic doctrines,

there is reason to believe that Brahmanism and Buddhism flourished side by side in the capital.

The Arab Muslims first came into contact with Arakan through trade and commerce during the 8th century A.D. and since then Islam started spreading in the region. After the advent of Islam in Arabia, the Muslims followed the footprints of their fore-fathers in trade and commerce. These Muslim Arab merchants made contact with Arakan. In those days the Arabs were very much active in sea-trade, they even monopolised trade and commerce in the East. As Dr. Rahim rightly remarks.⁶

“In the 8th and 9th centuries of the Christian era, the Arabs were foremost seafaring and maritime people of the world and the Arab merchants sailed across all waters to far off countries of the east and the west.... The eastern trade of the Arab merchants flourished so much so that the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal turned into Arab lakes”.

In the family history of the Arakanese kings Ra-dz-Wang, it is recorded that during the reign of Arakanese king Mahat-y-ing Chandayat (780-810 A.D.) several Kula or foreign ships were wrecked upon the island of Rarnree, and the people who boarded on them were said to be Muslims. These ship-wrecked Muslim sailors settled in the villages of Arakan as the Arakanese king ordered when they were taken before him.⁷ This is an important piece of evidence in support of the assumption that the Arab traders had contact with Arakan, just adjacent to Bengal, as early as the 8th century A.D.

There are frequent references to the Arab Muslims settlers in coastal regions of Arakan from the 8th century onward. On the basis of the various Arab and Persian sources Mr.Siddique Khan states as follows: **8**

"To the maritime Arabs and Persians the various ports of the land of Burma and more specially the coastal regions of Arakan.....were well known. Naturally, therefore, when from the 8th century onwards, Muslim traders and navigators were spreading over the eastern seas from Egypt and Madagascar to China and forming commercial settlements at points of vantage, the coastal regions of Burma were not overlooked. Originally, the intention of these traders and sailors had not been to establish permanent colonies, but owing to peculiar circumstances these acquired the nature of permanent settlements."

Dr. Mohammad Enarnul Haque introduces another Arakanese chronicle which informs us of an Arab settlement in the tenth century A.D. extending from the mouth of the Meghna to the North of the Naf river in the East.⁹ The Arab chief was the Thuratan in the Arakanese utterance whom the king of Arakan Tsula-Taing Tsandra (951-957 A.D.) claimed to have defeated in his Invasion of Chittagong in 953 A.D. In memory of his victory the Arakanese king set up a stone trophy in the conquered land inscribing on it the Burmese word, " Tsit-ta-gung" meaning "there shall be no war" and from this remark of the monument, according to Burmese tradition, the district took its name.¹⁰ But there is no direct evidence to prove that the early Arab merchants and traders established a Muslim colony in Chittagong.¹¹ We may at best say that the Arabs made the port of Chittagong either a halting place or a commercial station, convenient to the purpose of trade in the neighbouring areas. It is obvious that if the traders had trade contact with Chittagong, then of course, the Arakanese coast was not excluded.

With the passing of time, the number of Muslims in Arakan began to increase. Gradually these Muslims have established very good and cordial relations with the local people and intermixed by marrying local women. It was a long established custom that foreign residents and even visitors to Burma and Arakan, either by shipwreck or for commercial reasons, were encouraged to form matrimonial alliances with the women of the country, but on the strict understanding that when they left the country their wives and children might not be taken away with them.¹² "They differ but little from the Arakanese except in their religion and in the social customs which their religion directs; in writing they use Burmese, but amongst themselves employ colloquially the language of their ancestors."¹³

In collaboration with the Muslim traders and adventurers some Muslim saints played the dominant role to preach and consolidate Islam in Arakan. The official view, as projected in the East Pakistan District Gazetteer- Chittagong is that, ¹⁴

"Muslim merchants from Arabia, Iraq, Persia and other region of central Asia had started coming to Chittagong from the 5th century, and some of them had settled there for commercial purposes. Along with them Muslim preachers and saints, who penetrated deep into the country and proceeded down the coast to Arakan, which also had a Muslim settlement."

It is known that hundred of saints and their followers came, in different times, to Bengal and the Arakan region, from Persia and other Muslim lands along the old established sea- route and spread themselves in towns and remote villages.

These Sufi saints used to call the masses to the fold of Islam and their influence in this region is deep rooted. The Arakanese chronicle gives reference to the traveling of Sufis in that country at the time of the king Anawarhta (1044-1077 A. D.) during Pagan period. The chronicle states,

“When he (one attendant of the king) entered the forest he found a fakir, Possessed a mystic wisdom, dead with the marks of violence upon him.”¹⁵

This is an important piece of evidence that some sufis are believed to have come to the region of the coast of the Bay as early as the 11th century. Even, a Russian merchant, Athanasius Nitikin, who traveled in the East (1470) mentions regarding activities of some Muslim Sufis of Pegu. The Merchant pictured Pegu as "no inconsiderable port, inhabited by Indian dervishes. The products derived from thence are manik, akhut, kyrpuk, which are sold by the dervishes."¹⁶ It is quite probable that these dervishes were mainly Arabs and that at this time some Indian Muslim might have settled in these places.

Moreover, the legendary Hanifar Tanki and Khayafurir Tanki (both are shrines) in the Mayu territory between the rivers Kaladan and Naf, the shrines of "Babazi shah Monayam of Ambari" and "Pir Bader Shah" (Badr-al-Din Allamah), situated on the coast of the Bay of Bengal at Akyab, all bear evidence of the arrival of Muslim saints in Arakan in the early period of history.¹⁷ So they have played a very important role in the growth of Muslim population and in the development of a Muslim society. Besides their shrines have become places of pilgrimage to the local people and are continuing as such to this day.

However, Islam made its first major political and cultural impact during the early 15th century through Narameikhla, king of Arakan. In 1404/1406, the king of Arakan Narameikhla (1404- 34) was forced to driven out by the Burmese invasion.¹⁸ The expelled king fled to Gaur, capital of the Bengal Sultanate, and had taken refuge In the court of the Mohammedan king in Bengal. The dethroned king was received very courteously and allowed to stay there, "where he served as an officer in Ahmed Shah's army fought in his wars."¹⁹ Accordingly the Arakanese king had to spend a good portion of his life in Bengal, leaving his country in the hands of the Burmese. At last in the year 1430, he was restored to the throne of Arakan with the help of a Bengal army, sent by Sultan Jalaiuddin Mohammed Shah.

The restored king, Narameikhia, took the title Solaiman Shah²⁰ and established a new dynasty, known as Maruk-u-dynasty, with its capital at Mrohaung.²¹ With

effect from the year 1430 the kingdom of Arakan became tributary to Bengal and the kings assume a Muslim name and struck coins with Kalima.²²

As the Mohamedan influence was predominant, the Arakancese kings though Buddhist in religion, became some what mohamadanised in their ideas. G.E.Hervey rightly points out that,

"It is common for the kings, though Buddhist, to use Mohamedan designations in addition to their own names, and even to issue medallions bearing the Kalima, the Mohamedan confession of faith, in Persian script." ²³

This practice was prevalent among the Arakanese kings till the first half of the seventeenth century. This was because they not only wished to be thought of as sultans in their own rights, but also because there were Muslims in ever larger numbers among their subjects. A.P.Phayre observes that the practice of assuming Muslim name and inscribing Kalima in their coins was probably first introduced in fulfillment of the promise made by Mung-Somwun but was continued in later time as a token of sovereignty in Chittagong.²⁴ He also mentions that "these they assumed as being successors of Mussalman kings, or as being anxious to imitate the prevailing fashion of India."²⁵

So the Muslim influence in Arakan may be said to date from 1430, the year of Naramaikhla's restoration. During his reign an unexpected development took place, which paved the way for a period of Muslim domination in the land of Arakan. "From this time onwards the relation of Muslims with the Arakanese became more intimate and for about two centuries Arakan was united in a bond of friendship with Islamic lands. As a result of the impact of the civilization of the Muslims, Arakanese culture also progressed and thus began the 'Golden Age' in the history of Arakan." ²⁶

After regained the throne Naramaikhla have taken some major administrative measures.

First of all, the capital of Arakan was shifted from Longgyet to Mrohaung near to the frontier of Bengal and where he established a new dynasty which known as Mrauk-u-dynasty. The Muslim soldiers, nobles and servants, who came from Bengal, accompanied by Naramaikhla, settled down at Mrohaung. These new settlers by the relative ease in life, the richness of living of the local women, have established permanent colonies in Arakan and its adjoining coastal areas as far as

north as in Chittagong. They built the famous Sandi Khan Mosque at Mrohaung. Gradually a mixed Muslim society and culture developed and flourished around the capital. There exist some Muslim settlements in Northern Arakan till now; such as: Rowama, Nedanpara, Muallempara, Sampuchik Kuyipara, Kamarpara etc." **27**

Secondly, he established one more military post of Gaudian soldiers at Sandway and Rarnree (under Chawpiu) in the south Arakan to protect Burmese aggression by strengthening frontier integrity. These Gaudian soldiers lived there for centuries with the local inhabitants with peace and amity. There also exist some Muslim settlements which known as Showyejubi, Chanbi, Nazabi, Chandayek, Thadey, Sayadow, Sinbin under Sandway district and Chawknemu, Chaney, Jaiiyapara and Meherbun of Chawpiu district. **28** T

Thirdly, in accordance with the Muslim tradition like Gaur and Delhi, Naramaikhla reformed judicial system of Arakan. Accordingly the whole kingdom was divided into some judiciary unites, each of which was provided with a set of officials by the imperial order. The head of officials was known as Qazi. Some of them were prominent in the history of Arakan. They are Daulat Qazi, Saia Qazi, Gawa Qazi, Shuja Qazi, Abdul Karim, Muhammad Hussain, Osman, Abdul Jabbar, Abdul Gafur, Mohammed Yousul, Rawsan Ali and Nur Muhammed etc. **29**

Localitiss round the Mrohaung (Capital of Arakan) along the river Lemro were important centres of commercial activities. As a result the entire river line and sea trade of Arakan ultimately fell into the hands of the Muslims. It had a far reaching consequence on the trend of Muslim settlement on either side of the major rivers of Arakan. So major Muslim settlements in Arakan developed along the rivers of Lemro, Mingen, Kaladan, Mayu and Naf, Hundreds of village flourished in these settlements. (Please see, Appendix-A)

We know that for nearly a century, from about 1580 till 1666 A.D. Chittagong was under almost un interrupted Arakanese rule and while the Arakanese held these possessions in Bengal, they appear to have sent numbers of the inhabitants into Arakan as agricultural labour. Moreover during the 16th and 17th centuries the Arakanese, (were known in Bengal as Maghs) who, in alliance with the Portuguese adventures constituted a plundering party. By dominating the reverie tracts they plundered and devastated large parts of southern and eastern Bengal. **30** They carried a large number of men, women and children from the coastal districts of Bengal **31** as captives and the Maghs (Arakanese) employed them as agricultural labour, it is well known that the kingdom of Arakan was a sparsely populated area, which required huge amount of human labour for agriculture. With this intention

the Arakanese employed a large number of captives in the tillage of land on the bank of the Kuladan river to the Naf. This Kula population of the country form about 15 percent of the whole population. A.P.Phayre mentions, "the Kolas or Mossalmans, are of an entirely different race. They being of Bengalee descent." **32**

The next and last event was the flight of Shah Shuja, the brother of Aurangzeb, to Arakan in 1660, which brought a new wave of Muslim immigrants to the kingdom of Arakan and also caused political changes. Defeated and pursued by Mir Jumla, Prince Shuja had to leave Bengal for Arakan. Among those who accompanied the prince were his entire family and a body of his faithful soldiers. The prince was given a cordial reception at Arakan and was allowed to stay there under the royal protection. But as days rolled on it seemed that the attitude of the Raja was becoming colder and ultimately became hostile to the refuge prince. Later on the prince and some of his soldiers were murdered on Feb., 1661.**33** But "who escaped the massacre were later admitted into the king's bodyguard as a special archers unit called Kamans or Kamanci,"**34** From 1666 to 1710 the political rule of Arakan was completely in their hands, during which the Muslim Kaman units played a decisive role of king makers and king breakers. Their numbers were increased from time to time by fresh arrivals from upper India. **35** Their descendants still survive in Ramree and in few villages near Akyab. Their language is Arakanese and their customs are similar to Arakan customs in everything except religion Islam.

Now I would like to trace the ethnic identity of the Ruhaingya Muslims:

The Muslims in Arakan are the direct progeny of the early Muslim as an ethnic race. They are the descendants of the Muslim Arabs, Moors, Persians, Turks, Mughals and Bengalis who came mostly as traders, warriors and saints through overland and sea-route. Many settled in Arakan and mixing with the local people developed the present stock of people known as "Rohingyas".

Some people say that the term 'Rohingya' is derived from the Arabic word 'Raham' meaning sympathy. They say that it was during the reign of king Mahayn-at-chandra some Arab ships were wrecked along the shores of Arakan and the ill-fated people who boarded on them, begged for help by uttering Raham, Raham, Raham. Gradually it changed from Raham to Rhohang and finally they were named Rohingyas. Hence the Muslim populations around Mrohaung, the capital of Arakan, are known to be Rohingyas.

This view was first expressed by a Rohaigya writer Mr. Khalilur Rahman in his paper "Tarik- i-Islam Arakan & Burma." **36** But it is rejected by Jahiruddin

Ahmed and Nazir Ahmed, former president and Secretary of Arakan Muslim Conference respectively. They argued that,

*"We met a few hundreds of Muslims along the sea-shore near Akyab, known as 'Thambu Kya' Muslims meaning ship wrecked Muslims.....
This Thambu kya Muslims do not claim to be Ruhaingyas nor are they known by others as such. Had Ruhaingyas been derived from the Arabic word 'Raham' these "Thambu kyas" would have been the first group to be known as Ruhaingyas" 37*

According to them the Ruhaingyas are the descendant of the inhabitants of Ruha in Afganistan. As they observe:

*"The Muslim conquerors of Bengal, including Bakhtiyar Khilji and the Muslims deputed from Bengal to Arakan were originally the inhabitants of Ruah, a district of Ghore in Afganistan. These Muslims named Arakanas Ruhang or Roshang. In the dialect prevailing in Chittagong and Arakan 'Ha' and Sha' ar interchangeable
... So Ruhang and Rosang are different pronunciation of the same word. The Muslims themselves were known as the Ruhains meaning the offsprings of Ruha." 38 This view is also untenable.*

It is true that the term Roang / Rohang / Roshang is the corrupt form of the old name of Mrohaung, the capital of Arakan. Later on, the inhabitants who lived in Rohang or Roshang are treated as Roshangee or Rohingya. Among the Muslim population of Chittagong two distinct groups are found; one is known as 'Chatganiya' and the other is 'Rohai'. Even the latter form half the total population of Chittagong, who trace their origin to Arakan or Mrohaung.

Since Chittagong was an integral part of the Arakanese kingdom till the first half of the seventeenth century³⁹ the natives of Chittagong had to live in the capital to serve the kings in various capacities, such as: nobles, merchants and workers etc. As the south Chittagong is close to Arakan, the inhabitants of this area are called Rosangi or Ruhaingya by the people of north Chittagong. In course of time these Rosang (Rohang) and Rosangi (Rohingya) are treated for Arakan and people of Arakan respectively.

In the medieval Bengali literary works the name Rosang is frequently used instead of Arakan. In colloquial Chittagong dialect the country is called as Rohang where 'Sh' being replaced by 'h'. Among the Bengali poets of Chittagong like Qazi Daulat,

Mardan, Shamsar Ali, Quraishi Magan, Aminuddin, Syed Nasir, Abdul Gani and the immigrants poet Alaol, they all are make references to 'Rosanga Sahar' meaning the capital in their literary works,⁴⁰ Even Alaol some times uses Rosanga and Rosaga Desh in his writings ⁴¹ Another poet, named Abdul Karim Khondakar of the 18th century, calls the people as Moraung and the king of the country as described as 'Moraung Rai'.

So it is clear that Rosanga is infact, a corruption form of Mrohang> Rohang> (H>S) Rosang or Rosanga.

The history of the Rohingyas reveals that they developed from different stocks of people who concentrated in a common geographical location. They have a more then 1200 years old tradition, cultural, history and civilization of their own expressed in their shrines, cemeteries, sanctuaries, social and cultural institutions found scattered even today in every nook and corner of the land. Moshe yegar notes that "the Rohingyas preserved their own heritage from the impact of the Buddhist environment, not only as far as their religion is concerned, but also in their culture." ⁴²

Language is the main foundation of culture and the Rohingyas have developed a language of their own from Arabic, Sanskrit, Bengali and Urdu which serves as common source of contact with in the Rohingya community. They have also songs and music of their own.⁴³

In the 1911 census, the Rohingyas were included with the Indian population as an ethnic group Indian origin. The reason given was that they looked more like Indians than like Burmese. On the other, the census of 1921 mentions the Rohingyas as really Arakanese. But so close to Indians that "the phenomenon is as much an annexation of India.... ⁴⁴ However, these census anomaly of counting the Rohingyas as Indians no doubt contributed to the present controversy over the Rohingyas origin in Burma. But the Rohingyas claim that in terms of their culture they are neither Indian nor Burmese. A British army officer, who served in the Arakan front during the Second World War remarked about the ethnic character of the Arakan Muslims as follows:

"to look at, they are quite unlike any other product of India and Burma that I have seen. They resemble the Arab in name, in dress and in habit. The women and more particularly the young girls, have a distinctive Arab touch about them." ⁴⁵

So the ethnic origin of Rohingyas is traced as far back as the later part of the 7th century A.D., When the first Muslim settlement was established in Arakan.

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